

## Feature: The Good Life Reexamined

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I recently had the pleasure of spending a few days in Amsterdam while teaching in our European Foundations Program with Julio Olalla, and enjoyed some great conversations with him.

Among other things, we discussed the current financial crisis and its implications for the world. One of the things Julio shared with me was some writing from the Bolivian Minister, David Choquehuanca, who is an Aymara Indian. Choquehuanca was writing about the experiences of the Bolivian Indians when the Europeans arrived.

In Choquehuanca's view, the worst thing about colonization was that the colonizers brought with them the idea of "a better life." "Before the colonizers arrived," he said, "we lived a good life. The pursuit of 'a better life' has meant that we see nature as a resource to be used; forests can be felled for industrial use of the land, etc.; and our good life is jettisoned for the sake of the pursuit of a better life."

Given what is happening in the world right now, with all of the financial crises we are facing and the environmental challenges, I find this distinction between a good life and a better one very powerful. I think we are all having to face the question, to different degrees, of what our pursuit of "more" and a "better life" has cost us in terms of our capacity to declare satisfaction, to be content with what we have, and to recognize the good in the life we lead **now**.

I, and almost all of the people I know, lead a good life. Certainly by comparison with previous generations or with people in many other parts of the world, we do. And, yet, I see so much suffering in people despite that good life.

In the conversations I have with the people with whom I work, one of the biggest causes of suffering is not that people do not lead a good life. Sure, people have worries and concerns like we all do, but, for so many people, suffering comes from an inability to declare satisfaction in life. The striving for more, the sense that just around the corner lies the better life, contributes to a lot of misery and unrest. As the line in the movie, *Fight Club*, has it, "We work all day doing jobs we hate in order to earn money to buy more stuff we don't even need."

And now, maybe, we are seeing some systemic, as opposed to individual or cultural, consequences of that relentless pursuit of more.

The economic system is under a lot of pressure, and several pundits are asking questions about whether this is the end of a paradigm that has been with us for at least 500 years. One of the biggest ironies of this is that, as I heard an economist saying recently, there is still plenty of food and consumables in the world. The reason people are struggling, losing their homes, etc., is because of the economic problems, not the lack of goods and food and raw materials. It's as if our cravings for more, our inability to declare satisfaction, have created a system that has created shortages and deprivation, regardless of the actual availability of raw materials, goods, etc.

Don't get me wrong—this isn't an anti-capitalist argument—economic growth and progress have brought us much. But our inability to say "enough," to appreciate the good life while we pursue "a better life" has cost us dear. Maybe now would a time to refocus on how we can live a good life, a simpler life, as we ride through one of the most challenging economic periods in generations. We might have to learn to live with less rather than more so that we can declare ourselves satisfied and experience the gratitude and peace that come from that.

There is a tale, which regularly does the e-mail rounds, of the Mexican fisherman who is happily fishing in the mornings, collecting a small catch, selling a few fish, and then spending the rest of the day with his family and friends and his evening drinking a few beers with his friends, singing and playing guitar. A visiting tourist suggests to him that, were he to work harder, he could begin to grow his "business" so that he can build a larger fishing concern, run a company that will produce more fish, employ more fishermen, and, after many years of hard work, the fisherman would retire and be able to enjoy the company of his friends and family. In other words, giving up some of the pleasures of his life today in order that he might be able to work towards a retirement where he could enjoy those pleasures again after years of hard work.

### Reflections and Practice

- Where in your life have you pursued "a better life" at the expense of a good life?
- What has been the cost to you or to those whom you love?
- For what can you declare yourself satisfied?

You might like to try the following practice: How do you move through life when in pursuit of the better life? How do you move through life when you are satisfied? Imagine the different bodies—the body of striving for more and the body of being satisfied. Which produces greater ease for you? Which is more familiar to you? Are you able to sit back in your chair and say to yourself, "I am satisfied"?

## Quotes

*To be satisfied with what one has. That is wealth. —Mark Twain*

*Learn to be pleased with everything; with wealth, so far as it makes us beneficial to others; with poverty, for not having much to care for, and with obscurity, for being unenvied. —Plutarch*